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Golden Anniversary

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GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY

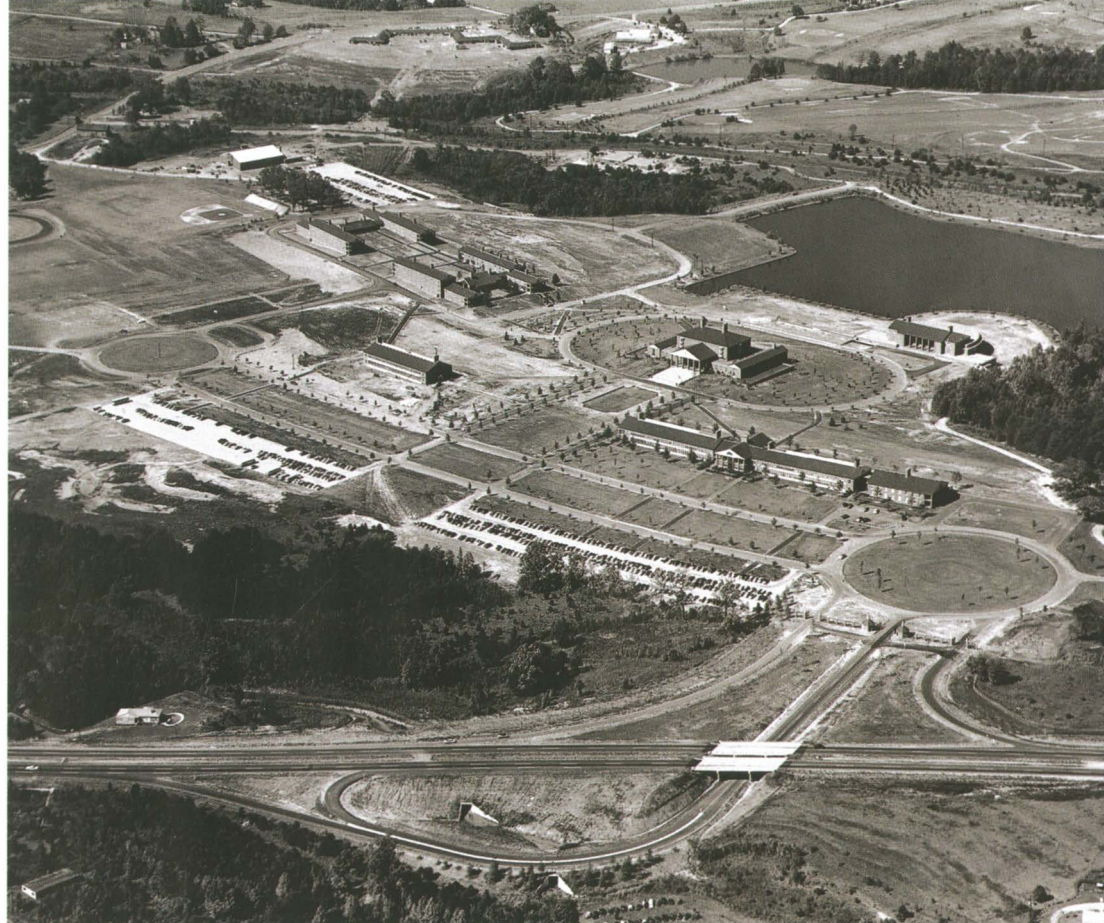




BY JOE M. KING

REMEMBERING 50 YEARS AGO, WHEN FURMAN BROKE GROUND FOR ITS NEW CAMPUS.





It was NOT a “dark and stormy night.” Rather, it was a warm fall afternoon, with a few clouds here and there.

Precisely, the date was October 6, 1953, one month after I had taught my first class at Furman. The Korean War had ended in July, and the university had experienced a dramatic increase in enrollment.

At mid-afternoon on that October day faculty, students, trustees, South Carolina Baptist Convention officials, alumni and friends of Furman made their way five miles north of Greenville along a two-lane ribbon of U.S. Highway 25. They made a left turn onto a short dirt road, which led to a temporary platform for dignitaries. The destination was a spot in the midst of farmland near the present site of McAlister Auditorium, where ground was to be broken for the new Furman campus.

I recall leaving my afternoon class in “Old Main” on the men’s campus downtown to make the pilgrimage north. In front of the administration building I saw Dorothy Richey, of the Department of Speech and Drama, get into her large blue sedan (a Nash model) to attend the ceremony.

At the groundbreaking site J. Dean

Crain of the board of trustees opened the service with a prayer. The Furman Singers and band performed, and President John L. Plyler spoke on the campaign theme, “A Greater Furman University for a Greater Tomorrow.” He graciously credited Crain with originating the idea for the relocation and expansion of the campus as he said, “We build not for personal glory or honor, but for the youth of the present and future generations.”

Charles F. Sims, executive secretary of South Carolina Baptists, gave the principal address on the relationship, past and present, of South Carolina Baptists and Furman. The first shovel of dirt was turned by Alester Garden Furman, great-grandson of Richard Furman, for whom the university is named.

But what had led up to this ceremony? Primarily, two old, worn-out campuses in downtown Greenville. The men’s campus “on the hill” surrounding Old Main, enveloping beautiful hills and vales and trees, needed to be enlarged, but its downtown site, where the campus had stood for 100 years, did not lend itself to expansion.

Across town on College Street, a female

academy, established in 1820, had slowly grown like topsy, creating a connected string of buildings on a beautiful lawn dotted with magnificent oaks. In 1938 the Greenville Woman’s College, as it had become known, was united with Furman under a single board of trustees. A shuttle-bus system transferred students from one campus to the other for classes. At the Woman’s College, David M. Ramsay Fine Arts Center was the chief cultural venue of Greenville for many years.

When, in the late 1940s, the board of trustees determined that Furman needed to relocate, several sites were considered. One was in the present Golden Strip area south of Greenville; another was on Grove Road where Greenville Memorial Hospital now stands.

As it turned out, farm property in the shadow of Paris Mountain north of the city became the site most favored by the committee charged with choosing the new location. It has been said that the decision was finalized when the committee stood on the hill on the south end of campus, where the Cherrydale Alumni House stands today, and marveled at the magnificent view. As an added bonus, the water



main from Table Rock Reservoir to Greenville passed through the property. Eventually, approximately 1,100 acres were acquired.

On July 29, 1952, President Plyler announced that a contract had been signed with the Boston architectural firm of Perry, Shaw and Hepburn, Kehoe and Dean. In February of 1953 the style of the buildings and the decision to use red, handmade Virginia brick was announced. In April Plyler presented preliminary sketches of the first buildings and announced that he had hired Ronald L. Hebblethwaite of St. Albans, England, to oversee the multitude of plantings on the new campus.

During all of the planning and development of the Poinsett Highway campus, one person must not be overlooked — Beatrice Dennis Plyler, Furman's First Lady. Her tasteful suggestions had an indelible impact on the future look of the campus and its buildings.

What occurred in the years immediately following the groundbreaking in October 1953? The next year, the farmland was completely reshaped in what was called the most extensive private

development project in South Carolina history. A creek was dammed to form a lake, and an underground sewage and drainage system was installed. Following a master plan, the land was contoured to accept the future buildings.

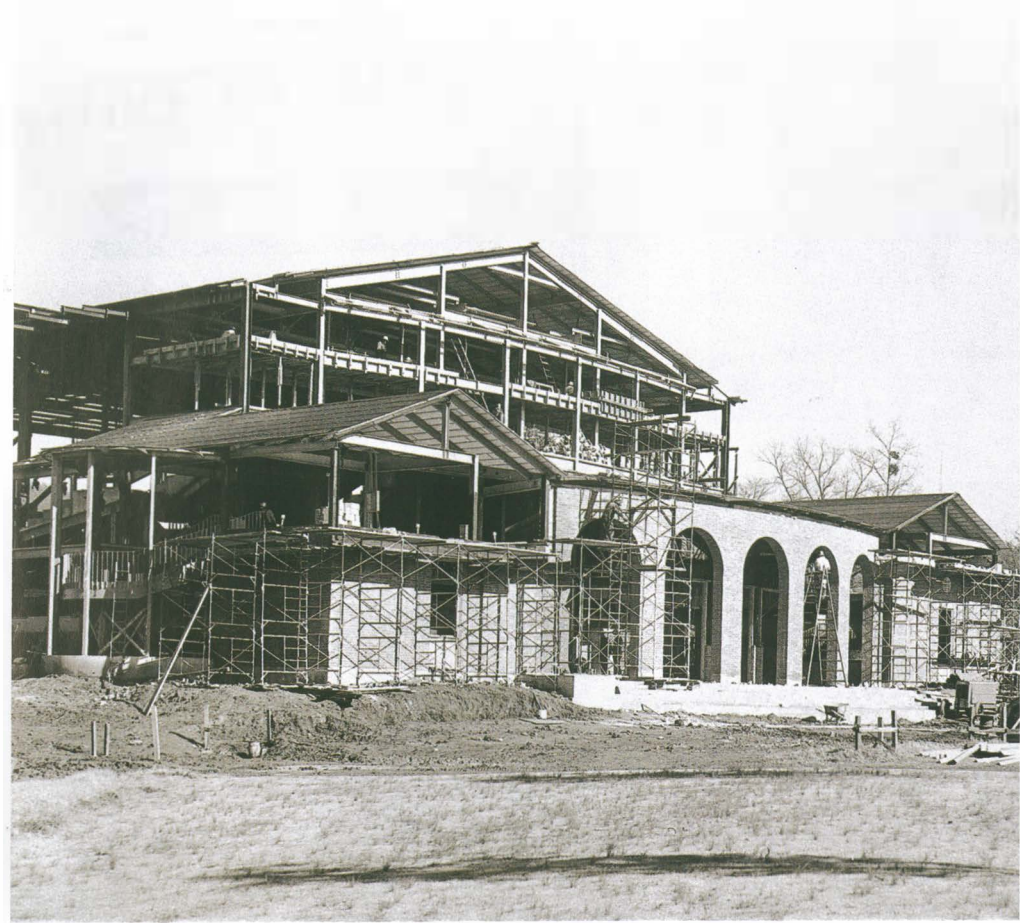
The first building on the campus was a greenhouse, tucked away near Duncan Chapel Road and a future golf course. From this building Hebblethwaite worked his magic and planted thousands of flowers, shrubs and trees. Years later, amid all the campus foliage, students would say, after experiencing Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, "Great Birnham Wood has come to high Dunsinane."

In 1955 the first building on the new campus was completed — Manly Hall in the men's residence hall quadrangle, now known as South Housing. The James B. Duke Library was but a deep hole in the ground, and only the south end of James C. Furman Hall was finished enough to be used.

In 1955-56 Manly Hall housed 102 freshmen with six senior counselors. They attended classes in the unfinished Furman Hall, had breakfast on the new campus, and went by bus each day for other meals



Opposite: While President Plyler watches from the platform, Alester G. Furman, Jr., assists David M. Ramsay, president of Greenville Woman's College from 1911-30, at the campus groundbreaking; a 1958 aerial shot of the new campus, pre-fountains and with the unfinished science building to the left of the James B. Duke Library. This page, top left: James C. Furman Hall in 1956 — and more recently. Top right: Signs old and new point the way to the university. Above: Paris Mountain rises like a sentinel above the farmland where the campus now stands.



Although the 1953 groundbreaking was held near the present site of McAlister Auditorium, construction of the building didn't begin until the late 1950s. It was dedicated in 1960.

and afternoon classes on the downtown men's campus.

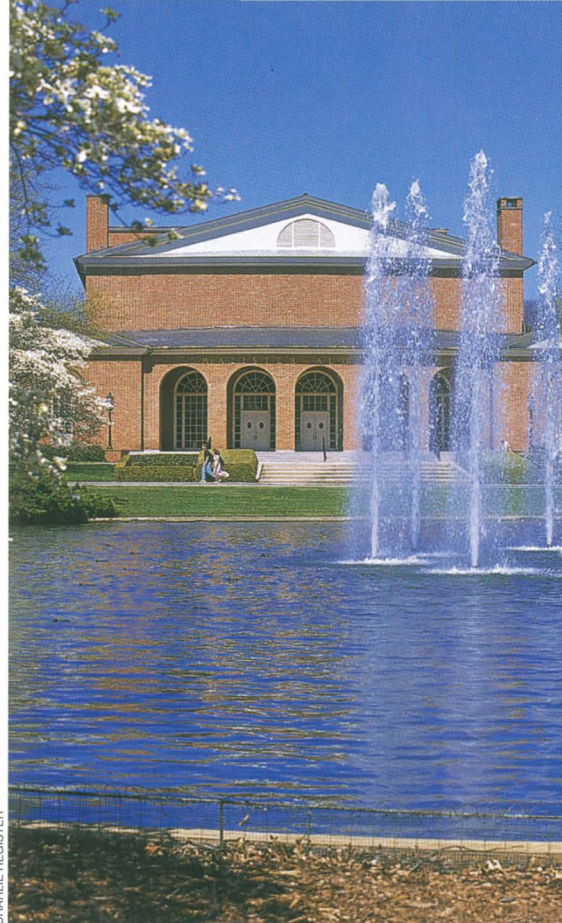
The freshman class that year was unusually strong academically. If my memory is correct, English professor James Stewart taught the first class on the new campus. My 10 o'clock religion class was next — in fact, during the fall semester of that year, I taught classes on all three campuses. At 8 o'clock I would go to the Woman's College, at 10 o'clock to the new campus, and at noon to the men's campus for a course in church history.

The classes that met on the new campus in 1955 were all taught on the Paris Mountain side of the building. In the late fall or early winter we were privileged to see something that jogs my memory every time I drive down Furman Mall. Tractors began scooping out large holes into which gravel was poured. Then, good-sized oak

trees, their roots wrapped in burlap, were carefully planted in the holes. The class watched from the window, hardly imagining how tall those trees would stand today, nearly 50 years later.

After the 1955-56 school year, the effort to house students on the new campus while it was being built was deemed neither practical nor economical because of the constant travel between campuses, and for the next two years no students lived on the new campus while construction continued. By 1958 enough buildings were completed to allow all men students to move permanently to the new site, and senior women lived in Manly Hall from 1958-61. When the first five women's residences were completed in what is now the Lakeside Housing complex, the women's downtown campus was vacated as well. All of Furman was united on the Poinsett campus for the 1961-62 year.

Old College, one of two white frame buildings in which students were first taught when Furman moved to Greenville in 1851, was moved to its present place beside the lake when the downtown men's campus was being dismantled. From the Woman's College came a set of memorial columns,



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which were placed behind the women's residence halls, and the "Shack." Dean Virginia Thomas had this mountain cabin built behind the Woman's College in 1937 to provide a snack bar and a spot for socializing. It was placed across the lake on the new campus, and for many years served as an excellent facility for group meetings and informal socializing. In recent years it has been a student residence alongside the Cabin, Cottage and Hut.

After the men moved to the new campus, the property and buildings on the old campus began to deteriorate. Old Main (Richard Furman Hall) had been the centerpiece of the campus, and its Italian Renaissance style had made it the jewel of the Upstate. Much discussion ensued about what to do with the building and the old campus in general. Should it be used for a museum? A night school in the city?

I visited Old Main in the early 1960s and found much trash, broken glass and evidence that it was a home for vagrants. The buildings surrounding it had already been intentionally razed. I immediately predicted that a fire would destroy this

precious jewel. On October 1, 1964, my prediction came true, as Old Main caught fire. Although the building was only damaged by the blaze, the rest of it was soon leveled.

With the loss of this treasure, chain saws and bulldozers came in to flatten the beautiful hills and vales of the old campus and to remove 98 percent of the trees. One could never even dream of what had been there before. A second-rate shopping center, called the "Bell Tower Mall," was erected on the property, but it lasted only about 15 years. After much negotiation, Greenville County bought the mall, remodeled it and dedicated it for much-needed office space. County Square, as it is now known, made the property once more an asset to the city.

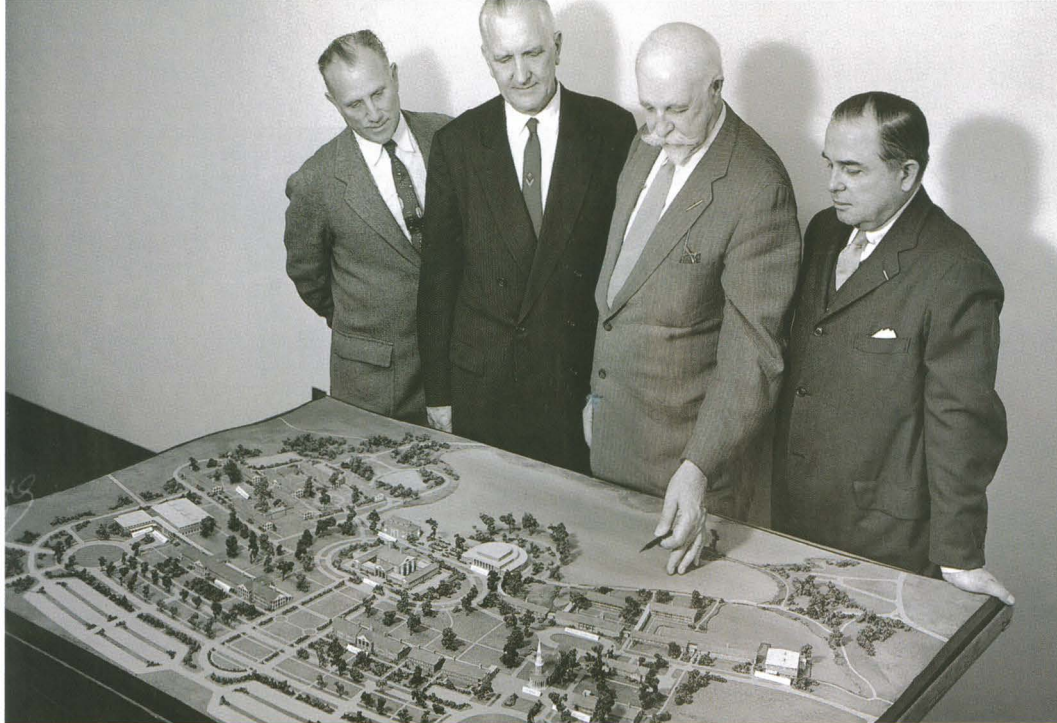
The choice property of the Woman's College downtown was sold to the city of Greenville for development. Later named Heritage Green, it became home for the county library, art museum and Little Theatre. The finest property on the Woman's College campus to succumb to the wrecker's ball was Ramsay Fine Arts Center. Its beautiful columns were given to Anderson College.

Today, it seems clear that both downtown college properties have become genuine assets for Greenville. And there is no question that the new campus has been the catalyst for Furman's growth and progress over the last 50 years. ●

The author taught at Furman from 1953-88 and is professor emeritus of religion.

Sources

For more on the planning and construction of the present campus, see *Academy and College: The History of the Woman's College of Furman University*, by Judith T. Bainbridge (Mercer University Press, 2001); *A History of South Carolina Baptists*, by Joe M. King (South Carolina Baptist Convention, 1964); and *Furman University: Toward a New Identity 1925-1975*, by Alfred S. Reid (Duke University Press, 1976).



JOHN PLYLER'S VISION

Plyler (second from left) and the architects study a model of the new campus.

This article is adapted from a talk given by Beatrice Dennis Plyler, Furman's First Lady from 1939-64, during an October 2001 program commemorating the university's 175th anniversary. Her husband, John, the university's longest-serving president, died in April 1966.

I'm often asked, "What do you think John Plyler would say if he saw Furman today?" I usually answer that he would be very pleased with what has transpired, but I'm always tempted to say that he *had* seen Furman as it is today.

John was a man of great vision. Even prior to the purchase of the property on which the current campus sits, we were standing in France, on the grounds of Versailles, and talking about the beauty that fountains could bring to a college campus. In England we saw the work of their gardeners. It was not by chance that the first building constructed on the new campus was a greenhouse and that one of the first employees dedicated to this campus was an English gardener, Ronald Hebblethwaite.

John also asked that the water flow from the springs on this property be measured to determine what size lake it would support. He wanted a lake on the campus. The stone bridge at the upper end of the lake was designed from a sketch of a bridge in Scotland.

When it was time to select the architects for the campus, John was most impressed with the firm of Perry, Shaw and Hepburn, Kehoe and Dean, and for a number of reasons. They had designed buildings for schools in New England, among them the dining facility for Harvard Business School. They had for some time served as coordinating architects for Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, they were one of the eight U.S. firms selected to design the memorials for each of the eight overseas World War II cemeteries (their

assignment was Cambridge, England), and the senior partners in the firm had held faculty appointments at Harvard or MIT. John wanted the best architects for the new campus project.

Similarly, he selected Innocente and Webel, a landscape architectural firm in New York. General Dean, Mr. Perry and Dr. Webel were professionals with whom John enjoyed special relationships.

Manly Hall and Furman Hall were completed in 1955 and the men of the class of 1959 moved to the campus in September 1955. John and I moved with them, as we left the president's home on the men's campus downtown to live in the faculty apartment in Manly Hall for a term, while waiting for a home we were building near the new campus to be completed. For the 1956-57 academic year and the next, all students lived on the downtown campuses, where they crowded into every available space. In the fall of 1958 all men and some senior women moved permanently to the new campus.

In February 1957 John was interviewed for a national broadcast on NBC radio. The interviewer asked about the rows of trees being planted on campus while many buildings were still under construction. John's reply was, and I quote, "We hope to make our campus second to none in the nation in beauty. To this end we have planted more than 5,000 trees and shrubs."

You can now understand why I say that John had seen Furman as it is today, not only in the beauty of the campus, but as a leading liberal arts college.